

## Chapter XI

### IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH AND THE LONG ROAD TO HEALING

In the hours, days, and weeks following Cho's calculated assault on students and faculty at Virginia Tech, hundreds of individuals and dozens of agencies and organizations from Virginia Tech, local jurisdictions, state government, businesses, and private citizens mobilized to provide assistance. Once again the nation witnessed the sudden, unexpected horror of a large number of lives being intentionally destroyed in a fleeting moment. Only those caught up in the immediate moments after the attacks can fully describe the confusion, attempts to protect and save lives, and the heartbreaking struggle to recover the dead. Reeling from shock and outraged by the shootings, students and faculty who survived Norris Hall and law enforcement officers and emergency medical providers who arrived on the scene will carry images with them that will be difficult to deal with in the months and years ahead.

Disaster response organizations including community-based organizations, local, state and federal agencies, and volunteers eager to help in any capacity flooded the campus. The media descended on the grounds of Virginia Tech with a large number of reporters and equipment, pursuing anyone and everyone who was willing to talk in a quest for stories that they could broadcast across the nation to feed the public's interest in the shocking events.

The toll of April 16, 2007, assaults the senses: 32 innocent victims of homicide, 26 physically injured, and many others who carry deep emotional wounds. For each, there also are family members and friends who were affected. Each of the 32 homicides represents an individual case unto itself. The families of the deceased as well as each physically and emotionally wounded victim have required support specific to their individual needs. Finding resolution, comfort, peace, healing, and recovery is difficult to achieve and may take a lifetime for some.

The people whose lives were directly affected include:

- Family members of the murdered victims, who are often called co-victims due to the tremendous impact of the crimes on their lives.
- Physically and emotionally wounded victims from Norris Hall and their family members who, while grateful that they or their loved ones were spared death, face injuries that may have a profound effect upon them for a lifetime.
- Witnesses and those within a physical proximity to the event and their family members.
- Law enforcement personnel who faced life-threatening conditions and were the first to respond to Norris Hall and among the first to respond to West Ambler Johnston dormitory. They encountered a scene few officers ever see. Their families are not spared from the complicated impact of the events.
- Emergency medical responders who treated and transported the injured. Their family members also share in the complexity of reactions experienced by emergency medical responders.
- Everyone from Virginia Tech who was part of the immediate response to the two shooting incidents and the aftermath that followed.
- Mental health professionals.
- Funeral home personnel and hospital personnel, who, while accustomed to traumatic events, are not necessarily spared the after-effects.
- Volunteers and employees from surrounding jurisdictions and state agencies, and others who worked diligently to

provide support in the first hours and days.

- The campus population of students, faculty, and staff and their families.

This chapter describes the major actions that were taken in the aftermath of April 16.<sup>1</sup> Many other spontaneous, informal activities took place as well, especially by students. For example, members of the Hokie band went to the hospitals and played for some injured students outside their windows. The madrigal chorus from Radford University sang at a memorial service for several students who had been killed. The private sector made donations and offered assistance. It is difficult to capture the true magnitude of the heartfelt responses and the special kindnesses exhibited by thousands of people.

At the time of publication of this report, recovery was only 4 months along in a process that will continue much longer. The following sections discuss the actions that key responders and entities took in the immediate aftermath of the shootings and during the weeks that followed.

## FIRST HOURS

After Cho committed suicide and the scene was finally cleared by the police to allow EMS units to move in, the grim reports began to emerge. The numbers of dead and injured rose as each new report was issued. Parents, spouses, faculty, students, and staff scrambled for information that would confirm that their loved ones, friends, or colleagues were safe. They attempted to contact the university, hospitals, local police departments, and media outlets, in an attempt to obtain the latest information.

Chaos and confusion reigned throughout the campus in the immediate aftermath. Individuals and systems were caught unaware and reacted to the urgency of the moment and the enormity of the event. There was an outpouring of effort to help and to provide for the safety of everyone. Responders scrambled to offer solace to the despairing and to meet emergency needs for medical care and comfort to the injured. These

initial spontaneous responses helped to stabilize some of the impact of the devastation as it unfolded.

Grief-stricken university leaders, faculty, staff, and law enforcement worked together to monitor the rapidly changing situation and set up a location where families could assemble. Some family members arrived not knowing whether their child, spouse, or sibling had been taken to a hospital for treatment for their wounds, or to a morgue. University officials designated The Inn at Virginia Tech as the main gathering place for families.

## ACTIONS BY VIRGINIA TECH

The immediate tasks were to provide support to the families of Virginia Tech students and particularly to the family members of the slain and injured. Countless responders including law enforcement officers, concerned volunteers, government entities, community-based organizations, victim assistance providers, faculty, staff, and students worked diligently to lend assistance in this uncharted territory, the impact of a mass murder of this scale. Many aspects of the post-incident activities went well, especially considering the circumstances; others were not well handled.

The incident revealed certain inadequacies in government emergency response plan guidelines for family assistance at mass fatality incidents. Also, certain state assistance resources were not obligated quickly enough and arrived late. Finally, the lack of an adequate university emergency response plan to cover the operation of an onsite, post-emergency operations center (and most particularly a joint information center) and a family assistance center hampered response efforts.

A variety of formal and informal methods were used to assist surviving victims and families of deceased victims.

***University-Based Liaisons*** – The Division of Student Affairs organized a group of family liaisons, individuals who were assigned to two or

more families for the purpose of providing direct support to victim survivors. The liaison staff was comprised of individuals from the Division of Student Affairs, the graduate school, and the Provost's Office. They were tasked to track down and provide information to families of those killed and to victim survivors, to assist them with the details of recovering personal belongings and contacting funeral homes, and to act as an information link between families and the university. Liaisons worked out the details on such matters as transportation, benefits from federal and state victim's compensation funds (as that information became available), coordination with the Red Cross, travel arrangements for out-of-country relatives, and much more. They also helped arrange participation in commencement activities where deceased students received posthumous degrees.

Interviews with victims' families revealed that many of the liaisons were viewed as sensitive, knowledgeable, caring, and helpful. Originally set up as a temporary resource for the early days and weeks following the shootings, the liaisons soon discovered that the overwhelming needs and expectations for their assistance would be ongoing. Many liaisons continued to help even as the weeks stretched on, while others were not in a position to continue on at such an intense level for an extended period of time. Still others were not prepared to serve in the capacity of a liaison and lacked training and skills needed to provide assistance to crime victims.

There were a few reports of poor communication, insensitivity, failure to follow-up, and misinformation, which added to the confusion and frustration experienced by a number of families. Largely, these problems occurred because Liaisons were volunteers untrained in responding to victims in the aftermath of a major disaster. Nevertheless, they were willing and available to fill an acute need while system based victim assistance providers awaited the required invitation before they were authorized to respond to Virginia Tech campus. The liaisons themselves had little if any experience in dealing

with the aftermath of violent crime scenes and were grappling with their own emotional responses to the deaths and injuries of the students and faculty. Liaisons did not have adequate information on the network of services designed for victims of crime until at least 2 days later when most of the state's victim assistance team arrived.

In general, most families reported that their liaisons were wonderful and conscientious, and they were grateful for the tremendous amount of time and effort put forth by them on their behalf.

### ***State Victims Services and Compensation***

**Personnel** – Assistance to survivor families and families of the injured could have been far more effective if executed from the beginning as a dual function between university-assigned liaisons and professional victim assistance providers working together to meet the ongoing needs of each family

Victim assistance programs throughout the nation are supported by federal, state, and local governments. Many victim assistance programs are community based and specific to domestic violence and sexual assault crimes, while other programs are system-based and operate out of police departments, prosecutor's offices, the courts, and the department of corrections. These programs provide crisis intervention, counseling, emotional support, help with court processes, links to various resources, and financial assistance to victims of crime. They represent a network of trained, skilled professionals accustomed to designing programs and strategies to meet the specific needs of crime victims. Moreover, all states have a victim compensation program charged with reimbursing crime victims for certain out-of-pocket expenses resulting from criminal victimization.

Patricia Snead, Emergency Planning Manager at the Virginia Department of Social Services (DSS), alerted Mandie Patterson, Chief of the Commonwealth's Victim Services Section (VSS) at the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), at 12:21 p.m. on April 16, and asked that office to stand by for possible mobilization to

support the needs at Virginia Tech. At that point, it was unclear whether DCJS staff from Richmond or local advocates would be needed to staff a family assistance center and whether Virginia Tech would request assistance for these services per the state's emergency management procedures. According to those procedures, before VSS staff can move forward, they must be authorized to do so from DSS. There was no further instruction that day from DSS.

The following day, April 17, the DCJS chief of VSS sent a broadcast e-mail to the 106 victim witness programs in Virginia to determine the availability of advocates with experience in working with victims of homicide. At 4:17 p.m. that day, DSS sent a message to DCJS, VSS and the victim advocates from local sister agencies indicating that they were authorized to respond to the needs of victims on the campus. The team of victim service providers arrived on April 18, 2 days after the massacre. Thus, even though the Commonwealth's emergency plan authorizes immediate action, the process moved slowly—a real problem given the substantial need for early intervention, crisis response, information and help in establishing the family assistance center. According to Snead, time was lost while officials from the state and the university worked through the question of who was supposed to be in charge of managing the emergency and its aftermath: the state university or the state government. Reportedly, the university was guarded and initially reluctant to accept help or relinquish authority to the Commonwealth for managing resources and response.

Mary Ware, Director of the Department of Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund (CICF), arrived on Tuesday around midnight. Early on Wednesday morning, she began providing the services of her office and talked to two on-scene staff from the Montgomery County Victim Witness Program. Kerry Owens, director of that program, told the panel, "You have never seen such pain, sorrow, and despair in one place, and you have never seen so many people come together for a common cause." The CICF provides funds to help compensate victim survivors with medical

expenses, funeral and burial costs, and a number of other out-of-pocket expenses associated with criminal victimization. At Virginia Tech, CICF enabled the rapid provision of funds to cover funeral expenses, temporarily setting aside certain procedures until they could be processed at a later date. CICF staff and the team of victim service providers orchestrated by DCJS arrived on Wednesday morning and proceeded to help in various capacities.

The delay in the mobilization and arrival of the victim service providers resulted in some families working directly with the medical examiner regarding that office's request for personal items with fingerprints or DNA samples to help identify the bodies. Though the university liaisons were helping, a number of families did not have the benefit of a professional victim service provider to support them in coping with the ME's requests. Many families had scattered and begun making arrangements with funeral homes, which had a direct line to the ME's office. Other non-governmental service providers—many without identification or a security badge—appeared on the scene without having been summoned to help. As a consequence, some families received conflicting information about what the Red Cross would pay for, what the state would cover, and what they would have to manage on their own.

The victim assistance team comprised of the state's two relevant agencies—DCJS and CICF—had difficulty locating and identifying victim survivors. Victim Services and Crime Compensation staff became aware that the United Way was fund-raising on campus and sought out those individuals to ensure that there were no conflicts or duplications of effort. The victim assistance team provided assistance for family members by informing them of their rights as crime victims and offering assistance in a number of areas to include help with making funeral arrangements, childcare in some instances, arranging for transportation, emotional support and referral information. Unfortunately, when many of the family members returned home to other states or other parts of Virginia, they were not connected directly to available services in

their local jurisdictions. Because of the need to respect privacy and confidentiality, victim assistance providers in the victims' hometowns had to refrain from intruding and instead had to await invitation or authorization by others to become linked to the families. There was a gap in the continuum of care as, in many cases, survivors returned home with little or no information regarding ongoing victim services in their jurisdictions. To the extent the liaisons had sufficient information about victim's assistance services to tell the families, they did. However, unless the liaison or other responsible on-scene providers provided families and victims with specific information regarding their local victim services office, they did not know what services were available or how to access them.

***The Family Assistance Center*** – The Inn at Virginia Tech became the *de facto* information center and gathering place where everyone congregated to await news on the identification of the wounded and deceased. It also was designated as a family assistance center—a logical choice for families who needed lodging, information, and support. Accommodations at the inn (rooms, food, and staff service) were well received, and hotel staff offered special care to the families who stayed there. However, the sheer magnitude of the immediate impact coupled with the failure to establish an organized, centralized point of information at the outset resulted in mass confusion and a communications nightmare that remained unabated throughout the week following the shootings.

The official Virginia Tech FAC was set up in one of the ballrooms at Skelton Conference Center at the Inn. Over the first 36 hours, 15 victim advocates from several victim assistance programs arrived and formed a victim assistance team comprised of seven staff from the Office of CICF and other service providers and counselors. Additionally, staff from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) was assigned to supervise the family identification section (FIS) at the FAC. The FIS, according to the OCME Fatality Plan “will receive inquiries on identification, prepare Victim Identification Profiles, and collect

any materials, records, or items needed for confirmation of identification.

A FAC also is supposed to serve as a safe haven, a compassion center, and a private environment created to allow victims and surviving family members' protection from any additional distress brought about as a result of intrusive media. In addition to serving as an information exchange mechanism, the FAC affords victims and family member's refreshments, access to telephones for long-distance calls, and support from mental health counselors and victims' service providers.

Arriving media, unfortunately, were situated in a parking lot directly across from the inn. Families had to traverse a labyrinth of cameras and microphones to reach the front desk at the inn. The media were a constant presence because they were stationed in the same area rather than at a site farther away on Virginia Tech's large campus. The impact of the media on victim survivors is enormous. In high-profile murder cases the murderer instantaneously is linked to the victims and together become household names. Some members of the press were appalled at the tactics that some of their colleagues used to gather information on campus at the family assistance center.

There was little organization and almost no verifiable information for many hours after the shooting ended. The operative phrase was “go to the inn” but once there, families struggled to know who was responsible for providing what services and where to go for the latest news about identification of the dead victims. Some unidentified people periodically asked families if they needed counseling. Those offers were premature in the midst of a crisis and information was the most important thing that families wanted at the time.

Family members were terrified, anxious, and frantic to learn what was happening. Who had survived? Which hospital was caring for them? Where were the bodies of those who had perished taken and how can one get there? There was no identified focal point for information distribution for family members or arriving support staff. For

decades, disaster plans have underscored the importance of having a designated public information officer (PIO) who serves as the reliable source of news during emergencies. The PIO serving at the FAC was inexperienced and overwhelmed by the event. He was unable to adequately field inquiries from victim survivors. Help from the state arrived later, but here again, repairing the damage caused by misinformation or no information at all became all but impossible.

Guests at the inn, officials from state government, and others reported a chaotic scene with no one apparently in charge. From time to time, small groups of families were pulled aside by law enforcement officials or someone working in public information to hear the latest information, leaving other families to wonder why they could not hear what was happening and what the information might mean for their own relative whose condition was in question. A number of victim families eventually gave up hope of learning the status of their spouse, son, or daughter and returned home.

Without a formal public information center, adequately staffed, the ability to maintain a steady stream of updates, control rumors, and communicate messages to all the families at the same time was seriously hampered. Here is where advance planning for major disasters provides jurisdictions with a template and a fighting chance to appropriately manage the release of information.

The university did establish a 24-hour call center where volunteers from the university and staff from the Virginia Department of Emergency Management responded to an enormous volume of calls coming into the school.

Two of the most deeply disturbing situations were the dearth of information on the status and identification of Cho's victims and the instances where protocol for death notifications was breached. The authority and duty for this grim task falls usually to law enforcement, hospital emergency room personnel, and medical examiner offices. Victim advocates, clergy, or funeral

directors ideally accompany law enforcement during a death notification. Reports are that law enforcement, where involved, conducted sensitive and caring death notifications to family members.

Virginia State Police officers, in some instances with local law enforcement, personally carried the news no one wants to hear to victims' homes around Virginia late into the night of the 16th. Officers also coordinated with law enforcement in other states who then notified the families in those jurisdictions. Not all families, however, were informed in that manner. One family learned their child was dead from a student. In another case, a local clergy member took it upon himself to inform a family member that their loved one was dead while they were on an elevator at the Inn. The spouse of a murdered faculty member saw members of the press descend on her home before his death had been confirmed.

The victims were known to faculty and friends across campus. As a result, information circulated quickly through an informal network, which allowed a few family members, who lived in the immediate area and who arrived quickly at the inn, to connect with those who were helping to locate the missing. Families who lived out of the area had to rely on the telephone to obtain information. Lines were busy and connections were clogged. They were referred from one number to another as they tried to track down information that would confirm or deny their worst fears.

Until Friday, April 20, families reported that they had to think of what questions to ask and then try to locate the right person or office to answer the question. The intensity of their pain and confusion would have been diminished somewhat if they had received regular briefings with updates on the critical information sought by all who were assembled at the inn. It would have helped if there had been a point person through whom questions were channeled. The liaisons and the victim assistance team did the best they could, but for the most part they were in the dark as well.

To make room for all the individuals who needed to stay at the inn, many resource personnel like Virginia State Police and others were housed in dormitories at nearby college campuses like Radford University.

***Counseling and Health Center Services*** – The university's Cook Counseling Center quickly led efforts to provide additional counseling resources and provide expanded psychological assistance to students and others on campus. They extended their hours of operation and focused special attention on individuals who lived at the West Ambler Johnston dormitory, surviving students, who were in Norris Hall at the time of the incident, roommates of deceased students, and classmates and faculty in the other classes where the victims were enrolled. The victims had participated in various campus organizations, so Cook Counseling reached out to them as well. Dozens of presentations on trauma, post-incident stress, and wellness were made to hundreds of faculty, staff, and student groups. The center helped make referrals to other mental health and medical support services. The center sent 50 mental health professionals to the graduation ceremonies several weeks later, recognizing that the commencement would be an exceptionally difficult time for many people. Resource information on resilience and rebounding from trauma was developed and distributed, including posting on the Internet.

Schiffert Health Center at the university sent medical personnel to the hospitals where injured victims were being treated to check on their well being and reassure them of follow-up treatment at Schiffert if needed. The medical personnel included some psychological screening questions into their conversations with the injured students so that they could monitor the student's psychological state as well.

***Other University Assistance*** – The Services for Students with Disabilities Office began investigating classroom accommodations that might be needed for injured students and planned for possible needs among students with psychological disabilities. The Provost's Office announced

flexible options for completing the semester and for grading. The college deans, the faculty, and Student Affairs were helpful in advising students and helping them complete the semester. Academic suspensions and judicial cases were deferred.

Cranwell International Center provided complimentary international telephone cards to students who needed to contact their families abroad and assure them they were safe. Center staff called each Korean undergraduate and many Korean graduate students and, with the Asian American Student Union and Multicultural Programs and Services, assured each one of the university's concern for their safety. They especially addressed potential retaliation and requests from the press.

Residence Life asked resident advisors to speak personally with each resident on campus and make sure they were aware of counseling services as they grappled with lost friends or roommates. Housing and Dining Services provided complimentary on-campus meals for victims' families and friends at graduation. Several of the victims were graduate students at Virginia Tech. The graduate school helped open the multipurpose room in the Graduate Life Center as a place for graduate students to gather and receive counseling services. They also aided graduate assistants in continuing their teaching and research responsibilities.

Hokies United is a student-driven volunteer effort that responds to local, national, and international tragedies. In addition to a candlelight vigil, this group organized several well-attended activities designed to bring the campus community together.

Human Resources requested assistance from the university's employee assistance provider, which sent crisis counselors immediately. The counselors worked with faculty and staff on issues of self-care, recovery, how to communicate the tragedy to their children, and other subjects. After 4 weeks, more than 125 information sessions had been held and 800 individuals had been individually counseled.



## MEETINGS, VISITS, AND OTHER COMMUNICATIONS WITH FAMILIES AND WITH THE INJURED

President Steger, Governor Kaine, and Attorney General McDonnell visited injured students in area hospitals to reassure them of the university's and the Commonwealth's concern for their recuperation. President Steger also met with many families over the following weeks. Governor Kaine held a private meeting with families who were dealing with the death of their child, husband, or wife and another meeting with injured students and their families.

On April 19 Governor Kaine appointed the Virginia Tech Review Panel to examine the facts surrounding April 16. After appointment, panel chairman Gerald Massengill sent a letter to all families of the deceased to express condolences and offer to meet with anyone who wished a private audience with up to two members of the panel. (As noted in Chapter I, FOIA rules require that such meetings be public if more than two members participate.) The letter also offered them the opportunity to speak at one of the four public meetings that were to be scheduled in different parts of the state. Several families took advantage of a special web site that was created as a tool for collecting information and comments. Others communicated their thoughts through letters. The chairman sent a similar letter to injured students.

Over the next several weeks, a number of families communicated their desire to meet. Others preferred their privacy, which of course was respected. Panel members and staff held at least 30 meetings (in individual and group sessions) with families of the murdered victims and with injured students and their parents, and fielded more than 150 calls. The governor designated Carroll Ann Ellis as the panel's special family advocate. She spent many days initiating and returning calls to provide information and to help families regarding their individual issues and concerns. Many with whom the panel met or talked with by phone noted appreciation for the

assistance and support they had received and for the work of the panel.

Several families raised concerns about poor coordination—what they saw as failings of the university, of responders, of communicators, of volunteers, of the panel and staff, and more. Some demanded financial restitution; most focused on relating what society had lost with those 32 lives, who by all measures were outstanding individuals whose achievements and character were making a difference in the world. The families asked the panel and the Commonwealth to find out what went wrong and change what needs to be changed so others might be spared this horror. That has been the overriding concern of the governor and of the panel.

Family members of homicide victims of mass fatalities tend to view their experiences and the impact of the crime from the following perspectives:

- *The overwhelming event and the system response to the scale of the event.* Very often, the victims become categorized as a group rather than as individuals (e.g., 9/11 and Oklahoma City victims). The particular needs of each victim can be overlooked as the public perceives them as a unit rather than as separate families. Victims are attuned to whether they received the information and care attention that they needed. Victim survivors want to know what happened, how it happened, and why their loved was killed. They look for resources that can adequately respond to their needs and answer their questions, though some answers may never be found.
- *Death notifications have long-term impact on victims.* Survivors typically remember the time, place, and manner in which they first learned of the death of their loved ones.
- *Where is the justice?* Victim survivors look to the criminal justice system to hold the murderer accountable for the crime. Cho ended his life and denied the



criminal justice system and its participants the justice that comes from a conviction and eventual sentencing.

A homicide differs from other types of death because it—

- Is intentional and violent.
- Is sudden and unexpected.
- Connects the innocent victim to the murderer in a relationship that is disturbing to family members of the dead victim.
- Creates an aura of stigma that surviving family members often experience.
- Is a criminal offense and as such is associated with the criminal justice system.
- It has the problematic overlap of symptoms created by the victim survivor's inability to move through the grief process because of a preoccupation with the trauma experience cause by a homicidal death. This completed grief reaction is identified as traumatic grief.
- Is pursued by the media and is of interest to the public.

Meeting the overwhelming needs of the families of homicide victims and fulfilling those expectations to a level each one finds acceptable is extremely challenging when there is a mass murder. So many people need the same information and services simultaneously. Systems are severely tested because disasters cause the breakdown of systems and create chaos. Without a well-defined plan, navigating through the aftermath is an uphill struggle at best. Even when plans are in place, the quality and degree of response to victims of disaster are often inconsistent. A small change in the initial conditions of a sensitive system can drastically affect the outcome.

All deaths generate feelings of anger, rage and resentment. In the case of a murder, and especially when the shooter commits suicide, survivors are denied their day in court and the opportunity for the justice system to hold that person accountable. This adds insult to the terrible

injury they already are experiencing. In these cases, accurate information in real time is imperative if survivors are to develop a sense of trust in the very systems they now must count on to explain what happened, and why it happened. When for a variety of reasons that does not occur, relatives of homicide victims can experience increased trauma.

Each family has its own particular way of processing the death of a loved one, because each life taken was unique. Several grievances, however, were shared widely among the victims' families as well as questions they wanted the panel's investigation to address. Among the major concerns and questions were the following:

- What are the facts and details of the first responder and university response to the first shooting, including the decision process, timing, and wording of the first alert?
- What were the assumptions regarding the relationship between the first two victims, and why were they made?
- Did those assumptions affect the nature and timeliness of the subsequent first alert?
- What are the facts and details of the first responder and university response when the shooting at Norris Hall began?
- With so many red flags flying about Cho over a protracted period of time, how was it that he was still living in the dorm and allowed to continue as a student in good standing? Why were the dots not connected?
- Was Cho's family notified of any or all of his interactions with campus police, the legal system, and the mental hospital?
- Why was there no central point of contact or specific instructions for families of victims at The Inn at Virginia Tech?
- Why were identifications delayed when wallet identifications, photos, and other methods available would hasten the release of remains?

- Who was responsible for ensuring that the media was properly managed, and who was supposed to be the authoritative source of information?
- What is going to be done with the Hokie Fund and what about other crime compensation funds?
- What common sense practices regarding security and well being will be in place before students return to campus?
- What changes to policy and procedures about warnings have been made at Virginia Tech?

These and many other issues all have been examined by the panel and the results presented throughout this report.

With regard to the individuals who Cho injured—physically and emotionally—their wounds may take a long time to heal if they ever can heal completely. Many of the men and women who were in the classrooms that Cho attacked and who survived, bravely helped each other to escape, called for help, and barricaded doors. Others were too severely wounded to move. These men and women in Norris Hall not only witnessed the deaths of their colleagues and professors, but on a physical and emotional level also experienced their dying. The terror of those who survived Cho's attacks in the classrooms was increased by the silence of death as the living harbored somewhere between life and death. Exposure to such an overwhelmingly stressful event quite often leads to post traumatic stress disorder (also known as critical incident stress) represented by an array of symptoms that range from mild to severe and which are not always immediately apparent..

The law enforcement officers and emergency medical providers who were the first to witness the carnage, rescue the living, and treat and transport the physically wounded were exposed to significant trauma. Their healing also is of concern.

## CEREMONIES AND MEMORIAL EVENTS

People seek ways to share their grief when tragic events occur. The university community came together in many ways, from small prayer groups to formal ceremonies and candlelight vigils. Cassell Coliseum was the site of convocation on Tuesday, April 17. President George Bush, Governor Tim Kaine, University President Charles Steger, noted author and Professor Nikki Giovanni, and leaders from four major religions spoke to a worldwide television audience and 35,000 people in attendance divided between the coliseum and Lane Stadium. Perhaps the most poignant event, however, was the student-organized candlelight vigil later that evening. One by one, thousands of candles were lit in quiet testimony of the shared mourning that veiled every corner of the campus. Stones were placed in a semicircle before the reviewing stand to honor the victims of the previous day's shooting. Mourners wrote condolences and expressed their grief on message boards that filled the area, while flowers, stuffed animals, and other remembrances were left in honor of the professors and students who died in a dorm room and in classrooms.

## VOLUNTEERS AND ONLOOKERS

Disasters draw an enormous response. At Virginia Tech, hundreds of volunteers came to offer their services; others arrived in unofficial capacities to promote a particular cause, and many drove to Virginia Tech to share the grief of their friends and colleagues. As occurs during many disasters, some special interest groups with less than altruistic intentions arrived in numbers and simply took advantage of the situation to promote their particular cause. One group wore T-shirts to give the impression they were bona fide counselors when their main goal was to proselytize. Others wanted to make a statement for or against a particular political position.

Legitimate resources can be a great asset if they can be identified and directed appropriately. An emergency plan should define where volunteers

should report and spells out procedures for registration, identification, and credentialing. That way, available services can be matched to immediate needs for greater effectiveness.

## COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE

With regard to identifying the victims, everything was done by the book and with careful attention to exactness as described in Chapter X. Therein, however, lay the crux of a wrenching problem for the families. From a clinical perspective, the ME's office can be credited with unimpeachable results. From a communications and sensitivity perspective, they performed poorly.

A death notification needs to be handled so that families receive accurate information about their loved one in a sensitive manner and in private with due respect. The OCME should have taken into consideration the wishes of the family and their care and safety once the news was delivered. Counseling services need to be available to families during the process of recovering the remains. The media needs to be managed with reference to families and their right to privacy, dignity, and respect. Finally, victims' families need to be given explanations for any delays in official notifications and then be provided crisis support in the wake of receiving that news.

For example, families needed to know what method was being used to identify their loved one, and when and how the personal effects would be returned. Some families were told that identification would take 5 days and were given no explanation why. Some families did not understand why autopsies had to be performed. Some wondered about getting copies of the ME's reports and how they could obtain those. The ME's office attached this information to each death certificate, but they concur this may not have been sufficient.

## DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

Many families interviewed by the panel praised Virginia Secretary of Public Safety John Marshall and the efforts of the Virginia State Police during the days following the murders. Marshall's leadership coalesced resources at the scene. The state police, with some help from campus police, mobilized to assist the medical examiner. They collected records and items from homes to help confirm the identities of the deceased and they carried official notification of death to the families. State troopers also provided security at The Inn at Virginia Tech to prevent public access to the FAC.

Finally, in the aftermath of April 16, the panel has discerned no coordinated, system-wide review of major security issues among Virginia's public universities. With the exception of the Virginia Community College System, which immediately formed an Emergency Preparedness Task Force for its 23 institutions, the responses of the state-supported colleges and universities appear to be uncoordinated.

While Governor Kaine covered a large conference on campus security August 13, to the panel's knowledge, there have been no meetings of presidents and senior administrators to discuss such issues as guns on campus, privacy laws, admissions processes, and critical incident management plans. The independent colleges and universities met collectively with members of the panel, and the community colleges have met them twice. The presidents of the senior colleges and universities declined a request to meet with members of the panel June 26, saying it was "not timely" to do so.

## KEY FINDINGS

Mass fatality events, especially where a crime is involved, present enormous challenges with regard to public information, victim assistance, and medical examiner's office operations. Time is critical in putting an effective response into motion.

Discussions with the family members of the deceased victims and the survivors and their family members revealed how critical it is to address the needs of those most closely related to victims with rapid and effective victim services and an organized family assistance center with carefully controlled information management. Family members of homicide victims struggle with two distinct processes: the grief associated with the loss of a loved one and the wounding of the spirit created by the trauma. Together they impose the tremendous burden of a complicated grieving process.

Post traumatic stress is likely to have affected many dozens of individuals beginning with the men and women who were in the direct line of fire or elsewhere in Norris Hall and survived, and the first responders to the scene who dealt with the horrific scene.

While every injured victim and every family members of a deceased victim is unique, much of what they reported about the confusion and disorganization following the incident was similar in nature.

Numerous families reported frustration with poor communications and organization in the university's outreach following the tragedy, including errors and omissions made at commencement proceedings.

A coordinated system-wide response to public safety is lacking. With the exception of the Virginia community College System, which immediately formed an Emergency Preparedness Task Force for its 23 institutions, the response of the state-supported colleges and universities has been uncoordinated. To the panel's knowledge, there have been no meetings of presidents and senior administrators to discuss such issues as guns on campus, privacy laws, admissions processes, and critical incident management plans. The independent colleges and universities met collectively with members of the panel, and the community colleges have met with panel members two times. The presidents of the senior colleges and universities declined a request to meet

with members of the panel June 26, saying it was "not timely" to do so.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The director of Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund and the chief of the Victim Services Section (Department of Criminal Justice) conducted internal after-action reviews and prepared recommendations for the future based on the lessons that were learned. The recommendations with which the panel concurred are incorporated into the following recommendations.

***XI-1 Emergency management plans should include a section on victim services that addresses the significant impact of homicide and other disaster-caused deaths on survivors and the role of victim service providers in the overall plan.*** Victim service professionals should be included in the planning, training, and execution of crisis response plans. Better guidelines need to be developed for federal and state response and support to local governments during mass fatality events.

***XI-2 Universities and colleges should ensure that they have adequate plans to stand up a joint information center with a public information officer and adequate staff during major incidents on campus.*** The outside resources that are available (including those from the state) and the means for obtaining their assistance quickly should be listed in the plan. Management of the media and of self-directed volunteers should be included.

***XI-3 When a family assistance center is created after a criminal mass casualty event, victim advocates should be called immediately to assist the victims and their families.*** Ideally, a trained victim service provider should be assigned to serve as a liaison to each victim or victim's family as soon as practical. The victim service should help victims navigate the agencies at the FAC.

***XI-4 Regularly scheduled briefings should be provided to victims' families as to the status of the investigation, the***

**identification process, and the procedures for retrieving the deceased.** Local or state victim advocates should be present with the families or on behalf of out-of-state families who are not present so that those families are provided the same up-to-date information.

**XI-5 Because of the extensive physical and emotional impact of this incident, both short- and long-term counseling should be made available to first responders, students, staff, faculty members, university leaders, and the staff of The Inn at Virginia Tech.** Federal funding is available from the Office for Victims of Crime for this purpose.

**XI-6 Training in crisis management is needed at universities and colleges.** Such training should involve university and area-wide disaster response agencies training together under a unified command structure.

**XI-7 Law enforcement agencies should ensure that they have a victim services section or identified individual trained and skilled to respond directly and immediately to the needs of victims of crime from within the department.** Victims of crime are best served when they receive immediate support for their needs. Law enforcement and victim services form a strong support system for provision of direct and early support.

**XI-8 It is important that the state's Victims Services Section work to ensure that the injured victims are linked with local victim assistance professionals for ongoing help related to their possible needs.**

**XI-9 Since all crime is local, the response to emergencies caused by crime should start with a local plan that is linked to the wider community. Universities and colleges should work with their local government partners to improve plans for mutual aid in all areas of crisis response, including that of victim services.**

**XI-10 Universities and colleges should create a victim assistance capability either in-house or through linkages to county-based professional victim assistance providers for victims of all crime categories. A victim assistance office or designated campus victim advocate will ensure that victims of crime are made aware of their rights as victims and have access to services.**

**XI-11 In order to advance public safety and meet public needs, Virginia's colleges and universities need to work together as a coordinated system of state-supported institutions.**